



Healthy Sleep Habits for Older Adults and Sleep Apps

Many things in life improve with age: red wine, family heirlooms, a great pair of jeans. Unfortunately, sleep quality often suffers as the years pass. *The Journal of Clinical Outcomes Management* reports that 40 percent of people 65 or older experience sleep problems. “Older adults often feel less rested because they wake more frequently at night and experience less deep sleep than younger adults,” says Costco member Robert S. Rosenberg, medical director of the Sleep Disorders Centers of Prescott Valley and Flagstaff, Arizona. “Older adults also experience higher rates of physical ailments that negatively affect sleep,” says Costco member Damon Raskin, a board-certified internist in Pacific Palisades, California. Arthritis, congestive heart failure, gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) and prostate enlargement (which leads to frequent nighttime bathroom trips) can all cut into sleep quality, he notes.

These sleep interruptions are more than a mere inconvenience; age-related shifts in sleep patterns affect the brain's ability to store memories, leading to forgetfulness. According to new research from scientists at the University of California, Berkeley, changes in the brain's middle frontal lobe result in less time spent in deep, restorative slow-wave sleep. As slow-wave sleep dwindles, memory suffers, because memories are processed during this stage of slumber. The Berkeley study found that the quality of deep sleep of adults in their 70s was 75 percent lower than that of adults in their 20s; the older adults scored 55 percent lower than younger adults on memory tests.

Can older adults halt the decline in sleep quality? Absolutely, says Rosenberg. Improved sleep habits can result in better-quality sleep for seniors, starting tonight.

Myth busting

It's a common misconception that humans require less sleep as they age, says Rosenberg. This false assumption leads many adults to shortchange their sleep requirements in their later years. “Adults generally need between seven and nine hours of sleep per night, regardless of age,” Rosenberg says.

For better sleep: Age-related brain changes and certain sleep disorders may result in a dwindling drive to sleep in older adults. See your doctor if you sleep less now than you did a few years or decades ago.

Medicine makeover

Adults over 65 years of age who live at home take an average of 8.8 medications each day, according to the *American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy*. Some of these medications come with an unintended side effect: sleep problems. Commonly prescribed antidepressants, including Prozac and Zoloft, can contribute to insomnia in some patients. Over-the-counter sleep aids such as Tylenol PM can leave lingering daytime grogginess that throws off sleep patterns, and can worsen restless legs syndrome, a condition experienced by up to 10 percent of the U.S. population, according to the National Institutes of Health.

For better sleep: Always ask your physician or pharmacist about sleep-related side effects for any new prescription, take energizing medications during the morning hours and talk to your physician about alternatives to problematic pills.

Nap traps

Naps for adults are now fashionable; new research from England's Surrey University encourages older adults to reenergize with an afternoon nap. However, according to Rosenberg, long late-afternoon naps can disrupt sleep patterns and exacerbate sleep problems in older adults. “Napping reduces levels of a neurochemical in the brain that builds our drive to sleep at night,” he says. “Long naps interrupt this process, so people don't feel sleepy at night.”

For better sleep: For the best siesta, set an alarm for 30 to 40 minutes, and avoid napping after 4 p.m.

Aching and awake

According to the National Sleep Foundation, two-thirds of adults who experience chronic pain report sleep difficulties. Anti-inflammatory medications such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) and naproxen sodium (Aleve) can help with nighttime pain caused by arthritis, but they are not a cure-all, notes Raskin. Any medication comes with some risks, and these pills aren't for everyone, particularly those with stomach ulcers, heart failure or high blood pressure. Ask your doctor.

For better sleep: Physical therapy, exercise and new injectable medications can help relieve arthritis pain that disrupts sleep.

Night light

For most adults, exposure to bright morning light helps support healthy sleep patterns. But those suffering from advanced sleep phase syndrome (ASPS), a sleep disorder more commonly seen in older adults, need a different plan. People with this condition feel sleepy in the early evening, around 6 or 7 p.m., and find themselves waking around 4 a.m., which negatively affects their social life and relationships, says Rosenberg.

For better sleep: Adults with ASPS should seek out bright light in the evening. This temporarily pauses the brain's production of “sleepy” neurotransmitter melatonin and helps stave off sleep for a few hours.

Raskin encourages seniors to uncover the root cause of their sleep difficulties instead of automatically reaching for sleeping pills, which can cause dizziness and medication interactions, and increase the risk of falls in older patients. “Patients will often ask for sleep medicines instead of finding out the underlying cause of the sleep problem, whether it's a health condition or another medicine that they're taking,” he says. “Getting to the heart of the problem is always a safer approach.”

Sleep apps

DOWNLOAD A BETTER night's sleep with eight sleep-promoting apps for your smartphone, tablet or computer.

iPhone apps—available in the iTunes app store

- Sleep Cycle Alarm Clock (99 cents) This enhanced alarm clock wakes you during your lightest stage of sleep for maximum refreshment and minimal grogginess. *Search “sleep cycle alarm clock.”*
- Naturespace (free) Offers relaxing nature sounds to help you relax and prepare for sleep. *Search “Naturespace.”*
- Perfect Sleep (free) A meditation tutorial to help promote deeper, more restful sleep. *Search “perfect sleep.”*
- Sleep 101 (free) A sleep-tracking system that records and reports sleep patterns nearly as well as a wrist-based sleep monitor. *Search “Sleep 101.”*

Android apps—available in the Google Play app store

- Relax Timer (free) This app tracks your daily sleep cycles and plays soothing nature sounds. *Search “relax timer.”*
- Lightning Bug—Sleep Clock (free) This ambience booster sets the mood for sleep with customized white noise. *Search “lightning bug.”*
- Sleep as Android (free) Features sleep graph history, sleep-deficit and deep-sleep statistics, and social network sharing. *Search “sleep as Android.”*
- Sound Sleep Deluxe (\$2.99) Offers low-frequency “alpha wave” music therapy to promote deep sleep. *Search “sound sleep deluxe.”*

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